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Cary Fowler, right, executive director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust, talks with a television crew during a tour of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault. The facility inside a mountain consists primarily of a 130-meter tunnel leading to three spartan storage rooms lined with metal shelves. But portraits of a far more sophisticated and devious place are being painted by writers, filmmakers and other architects of pop culture.

'Doomsday' for fun, profit

From novels to video games, science gets sinister in Svalbard

It seems the Forces Of Evil, when not forging Obama's birth documents and creating more film of the false moon landing, are busy these days plotting the apocalypse in secretive research facilities in the Norwegian Arctic.

Just ask a child heroine drawn "into a savage struggle among armoured bears and witch clans of the Arctic, and lead her to a scientific research centre where experiments too horrible to talk about are being carried out." Or villains motivated by the theory "control food and you control all the people of the world."

End-of-the-world and out-of-this-world tales are being spun in one of the summer's best-selling books, an upcoming TV series, a major film coming next year and an assortment of other pop culture. Much of it centers around a place bearing remarkable resemblance to the Svalbard Global Seed Vault - when it's not named directly - and some isn't

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Supreme leader: U.N. Secretary-General Ban ki-moon to visit Svalbard next month
Details at www.icepeople.net

Airport traffic down sharply so far in '09

25.7 percent drop in flights has Longyearbyen officials looking at cost cutting, parking fees

Flights at Longyearbyen Airport, after surging in 2008, are down sharply for the first half of 2009, including a 37.1 percent drop in cargo and route charter flights that provide most of the airport's income.

The 25.7 percent drop in overall traffic from Jan. 1 to June 30 includes a relatively small 8 percent drop in passengers, all totals roughly matching levels from 2007. The global economic recession is cited as part of the reason for the drop, but tourism and government officials have also noted traffic in 2008 got a boost from landmark events such as the International Polar Year and the opening of the Svalbard Global Seed Vault.

Total flights in Longyearbyen

2000	4,882
2001	5,890
2002	5,532
2003	5,963
2004	6,268
2005	6,062
2006	6,521
2007	7,064
2008	8,911
2009*	7,080

*Estimate based on Jan.-June comparison from 2008

Svalbard's decline is the largest among the 46 Norwegian airports operated by Avinor, which issues the flight reports. The agency reported a 4.5 percent drop nationwide during the first half of 2009 with wide variations defying size and region. Oslo, for instance, dropped 10 percent, Bergen 1.3 percent and the small Arctic city of Kirkenes 2.5 percent.

Most of the airport's income comes from movement-related activity such as takeoff fees,

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Inside

A 17-day trek with a mid-trip gig

EXCLUSIVE: Download the jazz album *Improvisaties Piano Solo* by Maarten Regtien **FREE** at www.icepeople.net

Runners hardly expect to post record times during the North Pole Marathon, so Maarten Regtien deserves some slack if he wasn't at his peak coming straight to the piano after an eight-day trek in the Arctic cold.

With sports tape wrapped around his fingers while crossing glaciers and his mind on alert for polar bears, improvising a two-hour

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Maarten Regtien performs a solo jazz concert July 22 at Galleri Svalbard.

Maarten Regtien traverses a glacier during an eight-day trek on Spitsbergen, after which the pianist played an evening concert in Longyearbyen followed by another nine-day trek. He wrapped sports tape around his fingers to protect them during the trips. Photo by Gert Van Es.

Coming in from the cold to compose

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solo jazz concert on a less-than-perfect grand at Galleri Svalbard in Longyearbyen was more about wish fulfillment than virtuosity.

"I'm a collector of things about the Arctic," he said, adding one of those was claiming bragging rights to playing the world's farthest-north piano. "I knew there was a governor here and I figured if they had a governor they had a piano."

Actually there's more than one piano on Svalbard, including an ancient model he played in the abandoned Russian mining settlement of Pyramiden that may well be the world's northernmost (Regtien said its playability was lousy, hardly unexpected or a foremost consideration). More proper was his July 22 Longyearbyen concert in a room-filling audience of about 50 people, including a large number of fellow trekkers, during the few hours he spent indoors before heading to a campsite and another nine days in the wild.

Wearing a simple orange pullover and other casual attire, Regtien sat down and without a word launched into an opening half consisting of variations on common compositions from Beethoven's "Für Elise" to Miles Davis' "All Blues."

"I always play to warm you up," he told the audience after his first song, talking them through the rest of the pieces ranging from personal longtime favorites to requests from his expedition group for something familiar. He returned after intermission minus the pullover and, while the audience was still taking their seats, launched into a 30-minute continuous free improvisation.

"Even I don't know what I'm going to play and we all have to pray to God I sound nice," he told the audience.

Regtien concluded the concert with a variation on "Memories of Tomorrow" by his mentor Keith Jarrett (trivia: the only winner of the Polar Music Prize not sharing the Swedish honor with another artist). Regtien showed the range of Jarrett's forays into jazz, classical, blues and beyond if not quite his edge - although the legend's habit of grunting while playing was also mercifully absent.

To the casual ear there was little indication of a struggle in Regtien's evening-long mix of moody and playful sketches anchored by left-hand vamps and colored by dense chords, rapid stabs and right-hand note runs. The ambiance was also fitting, with black-and-white Arctic landscape photos lining the walls and strong winds outside permeating quieter passages.

But Regtien was a harsher critic than his audience, saying he could feel the lack of practice after more than a week of traversing hills and ice fields. Plus the gallery's piano was a bit off despite some last-minute tuning he gave it.

"It's not responsive to my quickness," he said in an interview during intermission.

Plenty of those in audience apparently didn't notice or care, lining up to buy copies of - and get autographs on - Regtien's most recent album *Improvisaties Piano Solo*. The 2007 recording is his second unaccompanied project, coming 14 years after the similarly titled *Piano Solo*.

He said years of improvising means certain concepts are always in his head, hence the ability to perform an audience-pleasing concert after more than a week in the wild. But a description of his style at his Web site (http://www.regtien.info) indicates it's not an overly contemplative process.

"I have a distinctive style, but it is no longer my brain or my fantasy which stipulates what to play," he wrote. "For me it is as if my heart has a direct connection with my hands and commands these without intermediate."

Free recordings of Regtien in numerous other settings, including ensembles and electronic experimental, are also at his site.

There's more! Visit www.icepeople.net for the complete story.

What's up

July 28

8 p.m.: Movie: "Star Trek," U.S. science fiction, ages 11 and up. Huset.

Aug. 2

8 p.m.: Movie: "Transformers," U.S. action/adventure, ages 11 and up. Huset.

Aug. 9

8 p.m.: Movie: "Knowing," U.S. action/drama, ages 15 and up. Huset.

Aug. 14-20

Northern Traveling Film Festival in Barentsburg and Pyramiden. Movies, tours and discussions about history, politics and science. More information at www.norfest.ru.

Aug. 16

8 p.m.: Movie: "Drag Me To Hell," U.S. horror/thriller, ages 15 and up. Huset.

Aug. 23

6 p.m.: Movie: "Coraline And The Secret Door," U.S. animated fantasy, ages 11 and up. Huset.

8 p.m.: Movie: "Last Chance Harvey," U.S. drama, all ages. Huset.

Aug. 27

2 p.m.: Meeting of cultural and leisure enterprise board. Næringsbygget 1, "Tundra" room.

Aug. 28

9 a.m.: Meeting of the board of enterprise growth. Næringsbygget 1, "Tundra" room.

Aug. 30

7 p.m.: Movie: "Harry And The Half-Blood Prince," British adventure/family, ages 11 and up. Huset.

Sept. 3

6 p.m.: Activity Fair. Information about activities offered for kids, students and adults by various organizations in Longyearbyen. Coffee and waffles will also be sold. Svalbardhallen.

What's online

Icepeople.net provides daily updates of news about Svalbard and the world's polar regions, plus extras for articles from the print edition. Among the latest news:

- *NASA exploring ocean from Ny-Ålesund*
- *Making ice melt at minus 180 Celsius*
- *Russians looking forward to warming?*
- *The Arctic's 'canary in a coal mine'*
- *Arctic exploration in 'The Polar Pumpkin'*